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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

11. Iran: Nuclear Program

12. Mideast

Key stories in the media:

Leading media reported that PM Ehud Olmert has decided to tone down his stance on the convergence plan, which Ha'aretz said may be related to staunch opposition worldwide to Israeli unilateral moves in the territories. Ha'aretz reported that Olmert told Kadima ministers on Wednesday that he plans to present his plan to the Bush administration, but that only after "three, or 10, months" will it be possible to announce there is no Palestinian negotiating partner and move on to unilateral steps. Ha'aretz quoted Olmert as saying: "Everything depends on the situation on the ground." Ha'aretz reported that Olmert told Kadima ministers that the primary objective of his upcoming trip to Washington is to create chemistry with President Bush. Speaking on Israel Radio this morning, Israeli Ambassador to the US Danny Ayalon said he believes that a good atmosphere is expected during Olmert's talks in Washington and that the US administration will not try to "gently kill" Olmert's convergence plan. Speaking on IDF Radio, Ayalon said that Olmert's scheduled trip to the US presented a wonderful opportunity for Israel's new government to present its policies to the US president and to justify the much-maligned convergence plan. Ayalon was quoted as saying on IDF Radio: "The convergence plan is not a backwards step; it is, rather, an intention of initiative towards making progress towards a final status solution in the conflict with the Palestinians." Maariv quoted sources at Olmert's bureau as saying that "the Americans are not interested in the convergence plan right now." Ha'aretz quoted Olmert as saying that the key issue on the table will be the Iranian nuclear threat. The newspaper wrote that Olmert is planning to describe the gravity with which Israel views the threat and explain that the country is not leading the international struggle against Iran but expects the US and other countries to do everything they can to halt the threat.

The Jerusalem Post quoted Olmert as saying Wednesday after a meeting with French FM Philippe Douste-Blazy that he is willing to meet with PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas, but that he doubts that negotiations with a Hamas-led government will get anywhere. Leading media quoted Douste-Blazy as saying that France will not support Olmert's convergence plan. The Jerusalem Post quoted FM Tzipi Livni's spokeswoman as saying that Livni will meet with Olmert today to decide if she should meet with Abbas during an economic conference on Sunday. The websites of Ha'aretz and The Jerusalem Post quoted Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat as saying that Livni is set to meet Abbas in Sharm el-Sheikh on Sunday. Israel Radio reported that Abbas called Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik to congratulate her on her election, and expressed his hope that they will meet.

The Jerusalem Post reported that on Wednesday, ordering the IDF to prepare an evacuation operation plan, Defense Minister Amir Peretz signed eviction orders for 12 illegal outposts in the West Bank. The newspaper reported that Olmert gave his approval for the eviction orders. The Jerusalem Post reported that the orders were originally signed by former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz (two years ago, according to Israel Radio). The Jerusalem Post wrote that the outposts designated for eviction included: Mitzpeh Yitzhar near the settlement of Yitzhar; Yitzhar Darom (South); Havat Shaked; Givat Hadegel near Karnei Shomron; Givat Haroeh near Ramallah; Mitzpeh Assaf near Beit El; Mitzpeh Lachish near Hebron; and Hazon David near Kiryat Arba. Maariv reported that in the past few days Peretz instructed the Israeli defense establishment to prepare for the evacuation of 124 illegal outposts.

Ha'aretz reported that Chief Justice Aharon Barak, the President of the High Court of Justice, wrote in a private letter this week that even though his opinion was voted down in Sunday's High Court ruling upholding a ban on family unification, most of the other justices agree with his position that the law violates constitutional rights and is not proportional. He was quoted as saying that they also agreed that if the Knesset were to extend the validity of the Citizenship Law in its current format, the court would overturn it. Hatzofe cited the Palestinian daily Al-Quds as saying that senior Hamas members have recently debated the option of negotiations with Israel in order to reduce international pressure on their movement.

Major media reported that on Wednesday, PA Interior Minister Said Siam announced that a new 3,000-strong security unit comprised of militants would be deployed across the Gaza Strip and start operating immediately. Ha'aretz wrote that Siam's move was in direct defiance of a veto by Abbas. The Jerusalem Post reported that Abbas deployed hundreds of PA policemen in response to Siam's move. Israel Radio reported that last night, Fatah and Hamas representatives met at the residence of the Egyptian Consul in Gaza to try to defuse the tension between the factions, and quoted participants as saying that the talks were positive. Leading Israeli electronic media and news websites quoted senior Abbas aide Saeb Erekat as saying this morning that Abbas has told the Hamas-led government it must immediately remove its new security forces from the streets of Gaza.

Yediot reported that the IDF intends to equip its bases along the border with the Gaza Strip with buildings resistant to direct hits by Qassam rockets, while neighboring civilian communities will remain with minimal protection.

Ha'aretz reported that on Wednesday, Israel opened the Karni crossing on the Gaza Strip border to merchandise for the first time in several months, following a decision by Peretz on Sunday. The crossing opened in the morning for the export of goods from Gaza, mostly produce, and beginning Wednesday afternoon, for import from Israel. Ha'aretz quoted Peretz as saying that the opening of the crossing was a strategic decision that would directly impact the Gaza economy.

Maariv reported that a Kuwaiti agent of Al Qaida recruited Gaza meat salesman Rakam Abu-Laila, whom he instructed to murder Americans. The newspaper said that Abu-Laila was arrested following US-Israeli cooperation, but that the Hamas government quietly released him two weeks ago.

Yediot and The Jerusalem Post reported that, in defiance of the German government's policy, Atef Adwan, a Hamas official and the PA's Minister for Refugees, who Yediot said was invited by senior Social-Democrat Bundestag member Detlef Dzembritzki, visited Germany for several hours. The media wrote that German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her annoyance about the visit.

Yediot reported that new Italian FM Massimo D'Alema, who in the past dubbed Israel a "terrorist state," is expected to change his country's pro-Israeli policy.

Ha'aretz reported that on Wednesday, the Jerusalem Magistrate's court acquitted leftist activists Yehonatan Pollak and Moshe Snitz of charges of rioting during demonstrations against the construction of the separation fence on lands belonging to the West Bank village of Budrus in September 2004. Ha'aretz quoted Judge Alexander Ron as saying: "The principle of freedom to demonstrate is a prime constitutional

right." However, Ron also wrote in his ruling that the court "rejects with repugnance any behavior that appears to support events where stones are thrown at police and soldiers ... even if perhaps under certain circumstances the accused cannot be found guilty of a concrete criminal act."

The media reported that on Wednesday, Knesset Member Ahmed Tibi (United Arab List/Arab Movement for Renewal), who was an adviser to the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, was appointed as one of Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik's deputies. Yediot wrote that in this capacity, Tibi could become Acting President of Israel.

All media (banner in Maariv) quoted Olmert as saying Wednesday at a convention of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel that his government will fight "organized crime." Maariv cited international data which it said show that Israel ranks high in criminal statistics within the Western world. Leading media reported that Olmert hinted that Israeli leaders would not be exempt from possible corruption investigations.

The Jerusalem Post's web site published a Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) story stating that on Wednesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice named Gregg Rickman, a "dogged investigator" who has tracked the Swiss banks' role in the Holocaust, as the first special envoy for monitoring and combating anti-Semitism. The JTA wrote that Jewish leaders unanimously agreed that the appointment would push the office monitoring anti-Semitism, in existence barely 18 months, to the department's front burner.

The Jerusalem Post reported that a delegation of Jewish community leaders from Venezuela arrived in Israel as part of a mission intended to explore options for Venezuelan Jews who want to leave their troubled country and move to Israel.

Ha'aretz reported that Daniel Wultz, the 16-year-old American who died on Sunday after being critically wounded in the Tel Aviv suicide bombing three weeks ago, was buried in Weston, Florida, on Wednesday.

I. Iran: Nuclear Program:

Summary:

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Israel is finding it difficult to formulate a position on an American-Iranian dialogue. It would be best if Olmert decides what he thinks before he leaves for Washington."

Middle East affairs commentator Dr. Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "[The Iranian nuclear program] is already a global problem, and there is no reason for Israel to turn it into an Israeli problem by its own hand."

Block Quotes:

I. "Don't Be a Wimp"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (5/18): "[Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad's letter to U.S. President George W. Bush was a brilliant piece of diplomacy that surprised Jerusalem. Despite the letter's harsh formulations against Israel and the US, it raised pressure on the American administration to engage Tehran in talks about its nuclear program. Henry Kissinger called on Bush this week not to miss the opportunity. But Israel is finding it difficult to formulate a position on an American-Iranian dialogue. It would be best if Olmert decides what he thinks before he leaves for Washington, since the question will certainly come up. What will Olmert say to Bush next week? The recommendation he's been given was to make clear the seriousness of the Iranian threat to Israel, without appearing to be pushing America into a military adventure or explicitly threatening an Israeli operation. Olmert will need the best of his political skills for that mission. But that won't be enough. He has to fortify his security authority at home, lest he end up in the position of a wimp afraid to act against Iran. The decision on this sensitive issue has to be made judiciously and not due to domestic weakness."

II. "What Should Be Done About Ahmadinejad?"

Middle East affairs commentator Dr. Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (5/18): "Israel must stop serving as a tool in the hands of the Iranian dictatorship. Any Israeli declaration that it will destroy Iran or act against it only plays into Ahmadinejad's hands.... Israel should respond in the only way that will thwart his goals: by treating Iran respectfully. The Israeli spokespersons must at every opportunity use only one message, and repeat it again and again: Israel has no conflict with Iran, neither territorial, nor national nor any other kind. Israel respects Iran and would be glad to renew the close relations that existed between the two countries for many years.... Israel owes a historical debt to Iran for the fact that the Persian king Cyrus permitted the Jewish people to return to its land and rituals in 538 BCE, about 50 years after the destruction of the First Temple. For Iran, Cyrus is an important figure to this day. This does not mean that Israel should abandon the intelligence monitoring and close coordination with the US and the Western European countries with regard to the danger of the Iranian nuclear program. Today, however, this is already a global problem, and there is no reason for Israel to turn it into an Israeli problem by its own hand. This is already for the big leagues, and it would be best for little Israel for the US to take care of this, as it is already doing."

12. Mideast:

Summary:

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: "If [Prime Minister Ehud Olmert] instructs the security establishment to stop insisting on a [separation] fence that intrudes into the West Bank, brings the fence as close as possible to the Green Line, and expedites its construction, then he will help the war on terror."

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "Merely preventing Hamas from directly accessing international aid is not going to force it to modify its opposition to Israel's existence any time soon."

Former Editor-in-Chief Moshe Ishon wrote in nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe: " Even if Hamas's leaders are willing to 'talk peace,' they are still Israel's enemies."

Block Quotes:

11. "Unnecessary and Lethal Delay"

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (5/18): "The [West Bank separation] fence is not a total obstacle to terrorism.... But alongside the improvement in intelligence and operational coordination between the IDF and the Shin Bet security service -- and Hamas's decision to suspend suicide bombings -- the fence has made a significant contribution to a decrease in terror. Given these statistics, the foolishness of delaying the fence's construction in the Jerusalem area and the area south of it is clear. The construction of 285 kilometers of the fence is being delayed for legal reasons -- awaiting a High Court ruling or administrative and planning work in the army and government ministries. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert must refrain from repeating his predecessor's mistake. If he instructs the security establishment to stop insisting on a fence that intrudes into the West Bank, brings the fence as close as possible to the Green Line, and expedites its construction, then he will help the war on terror."

II. "The Elephant in the Room"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (5/18): "In essence the EU is trying to tiptoe around the 'elephant in the room' which is Hamas's terrorism-supporting, anti-Israel stance. Israel, too, is caught in the dilemma, anxious to avoid a Palestinian humanitarian crisis but also to turn up the 'change or fail' economic pressure on the Hamas-led PA. The trouble is that merely preventing Hamas from directly accessing international aid is not going to force it to modify its opposition to Israel's existence any time soon. Why change such policies when the Palestinians who put it in power are being subsidized

by the rest of the world?.... So long as it is led by an unreconstructed Hamas, of course, to even talk of a recovery plan for the PA is pointless and misguided. For now, the international community, and Israel, need to concentrate on minimizing the benefits that Hamas can derive from donors' humane instinct to alleviate suffering -- even when those who are suffering brought their plight upon themselves by electing a terror group as their leadership."

III. "Negotiations, But Without Recognizing Israel"

Former Editor-in-Chief Moshe Ishon wrote in nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe (5/18): "It turns out that the economic boycott imposed on the 'Hams government' has paralyzed its activity -- as regards policy as well.... It has suspended its declarations regarding the 'elimination of the Jewish state' and started to issue statements about its willingness to start talks toward an agreement with Israel -- without recognizing the Jewish state.... Proposals by [Hamas] are replacing one another. It is hard to know which of them is valid. One thing is for sure -- no 'change' that apparently occurred in Hamas can be relied upon. Even if Hamas's leaders are willing to 'talk peace,' they are still Israel's enemies. They haven't changed. As in the past, Abu Mazen is the person with whom it is possible to talk. We have to treat him according to the rule: 'Respect him but suspect him.'"

JONES